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Viewing cable 05MANAMA922, REFORM IN BAHRAIN: LEADING SHIA EDITOR HIGHLIGHTS

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
05MANAMA922	2005-06-29 11:48	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Manama

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9115>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9116>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9117>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9118>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9119>
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<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9953>

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

291148Z Jun 05

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000922

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: REFORM IN BAHRAIN: LEADING SHIA EDITOR HIGHLIGHTS
THE CHALLENGES

REF: A. MANAMA 900 B. MANAMA 885 C. MANAMA 884

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

SUMMARY

11. (S) Independent newspaper editor Mansour Al-Jamry, in a June 28 discussion with the Ambassador, gave a wide-ranging review of the complexities and challenges facing King Hamad as he pursues reform in Bahrain. On the one hand, the King faces challenges from his two uncles: Prime Minister Khalifa and Shaikh Mohammed. The King has been quietly trying to erode the economic power of the Prime Minister, moving PM cronies out of Cabinet positions and granting enhanced powers to the Economic Development Board (overseen by Crown Prince Salman). The PM, however, has allies sprinkled throughout the bureaucracies, and it would be wrong, Al-Jamry cautioned, to count him out just yet. The other uncle, Shaikh Mohammed, who is in a coma, has long lived outside the law and his financial interests are being protected and advanced by his children. One son, Shaikh Hamad, was at the center of a recent controversy over a wall built in a Shia village that cut off access to the sea. Al-Jamry led the charge against the uncle, which resulted in a rare retreat by a powerful Royal Family member.

12. (C) Another set of challenges highlighted by Al-Jamry comes from the opposition Al-Wifaq and a more extreme group of Shia led by activist Abdul-Hadi Al-Khawaja. Al-Jamry spoke positively of the way the King has dealt with recent demonstrations on constitutional reform organized by Al-Wifaq, and was sympathetic to "the box" the King finds himself in dealing with Al-Khawaja's more provocative challenges. He said that Al-Khawaja considers himself "untouchable" because of support from the U.S. and the West, but is an opportunist who has no interest in democratic reform. Al-Khawaja, he added, also poses a dilemma for opposition Shia, including Al-Wifaq and leading clerics like Shaikh Issa Qassim. End summary.

MANSOR AL-JAMRY: INNOVATIVE JOURNALIST

13. (C) The Ambassador met June 28 with Mansour Al-Jamry, founder and editor-in-chief of the independent Arabic-language newspaper "Al-Wasat," for a discussion of Bahrain's reform efforts and the various challenges facing King Hamad as he attempts to move Bahrain's reform process forward. Al-Jamry, who comes from one of the most prominent Shia families in Bahrain, lived in exile in London for many years before returning to Bahrain after the King introduced his constitutional reforms in 2001. Under Al-Jamry's leadership, Al-Wasat has provided lively coverage of controversial issues, such as the recent confrontation with a senior Royal Family over a wall built in the Shia village of Malkiya, and has offered innovative features, such as regular reporting of Friday sermons by Bahrain's leading clerics and text-message instant polls. He is well respected and liked, especially among Shia and well-educated Sunni. The King and Crown Prince have been known to seek his counsel on sensitive issues.

CURBING THE PM'S POWERS

14. (S) Al-Jamry said that, in examining the reform process in Bahrain, one had to look at two different dynamics: the struggle for the upper hand within the Royal Family, and the maneuvering between the Royal Family and opposition Shia. The struggle within the Royal Family traces its roots to three brothers: the King's father, the late former Amir Shaikh Issa, and his two uncles, Shaikh Khalifa (currently the Prime Minister) and Shaikh Mohammed (currently in a coma on life support, with his sons looking after the family's interests). At independence in 1971, the three brothers in effect divided and controlled much of the land in Bahrain. This has been an important source of their wealth and power. As Prime Minister, Shaikh Khalifa also controlled Bahrain's major state-owned enterprises, such as BAPCO (oil) and Alba (aluminum). With ally Minister of Oil Shaikh Isa Bin Ali running the state-owned enterprises, the Prime Minister had off-the-books access to income from the state-owned enterprises (aided in recent years when PM crony Abdullah Seif was Minister of Finance). As for Shaikh Mohammed, after a complete falling out with his two brothers he essentially considered himself outside the laws of Bahrain, seizing land that he wanted, not putting license plates on his cars, and intimidating anyone who blocked his ambitions. He was out of government, but amassing a fortune which he has passed on to his heirs.

15. (S) The King, according to Al-Jamry, has been quietly seeking to erode the economic power of the Prime Minister. This was seen in last January's Cabinet reshuffle, when the King succeeded in moving several Prime Minister cronies, including Finance Minister Abdullah Seif, out of their Cabinet positions. Significantly, however, he was unable to dislodge Minister of Oil Shaikh Ali (confounding widespread

rumors at the time that Shaikh Ali was on the way out). On the other hand, Al-Jamry stated, the King did succeed in blocking an attempt by the PM to gain control of a major plot of land being developed for government ministerial buildings. The PM wanted the property in his name; the King put his foot down (for the first time) and insisted that it be registered in the name of the government. Meanwhile, the National Assembly has suddenly become more aggressive in demanding an accounting of profits from such state-owned companies as BAPCO and Alba (Ref A).

16. (S) A potentially even more significant development, Al-Jamry stated, was the Royal Decree issued in May empowering the Economic Development Board (EDB) to enact economic-related regulations and to select the board chairmen of state-run companies. Previously, the EDB could only make recommendations, and the Prime Minister controlled the appointments of chairmen to the state-run companies. If the EDB truly takes on these new powers, Al-Jamry stated, it would mark an important shift in powers and resources away from the Prime Minister.

17. (S) But Al-Jamry cautioned that it would be wrong to count out the Prime Minister just yet. Although he left the country for an extended trip/vacation to New Zealand and the Far East this spring, apparently unhappy about attempts to limit his powers, he returned energized, active, and engaged. Al-Jamry said that the PM has allies sprinkled throughout the bureaucracy -- experienced technocrats who know how to get things done. In contrast, he said, the Crown Prince -- who is the driving force behind economic reform in Bahrain and is Chairman of the Board of the EDB -- has not had the time to develop a strong cadre of supporters. He has surrounded himself with a group of capable, well-educated advisors (long-time friend, school mate, and aide Shaikh Mohammed bin Issa was recently appointed CEO of the EDB), but they are limited in numbers. A further complication for the Crown Prince is that, in taking on the controversial issue of labor reform in order to alleviate growing unemployment concerns, he risks alienating Bahrain's leading private sector families, who fear the reforms will raise costs and erode their competitiveness.

THE OTHER UNCLE: HOLDING HIM ACCOUNTABLE TO THE LAW

18. (S) The King also found himself recently confronting the family of his other uncle, Shaikh Mohammed, when Shaikh Mohammed's son Hamad decided, without a legal permit, to build a wall by his residence near the Shia village of Malkiya, cutting off the village from the local beach (Ref C). Al-Jamry said that villagers from Malkiya approached him and asked what they should do. While there were plenty of other examples of Royal Family members acting above the law, particularly among members of Shaikh Mohammed's family, Al-Jamry decided to make a public issue of the case. His paper published daily articles (with pictures) about the wall, and -- along with the Member of Parliament from Malkiya -- made it a national cause and the site of demonstrations. The Minister of Municipalities got involved, as did the Royal Court, and eventually Shaikh Hamad was forced to take down the wall.

19. (S) While Al-Jamry viewed this as a good news story in which a Royal Family member was held accountable to the law, he lamented that in fact Shaikh Hamad backed down not in the face of the law but because of the personal intervention of the Royal Court. Al-Jamry maintained that Municipalities Minister Ali bin Saleh was too intimidated by Shaikh Hamad to deliver the court order himself, and that Shaikh Hamad only began to dismantle the wall after visited by his brother Shaikh Khalid Bin Mohammed, who is serving as Advisor for Security Affairs in the Royal Court.

THE WIFAQ CHALLENGE

10. (C) Meanwhile, the King has been dealing with separate challenges from the Shia opposition. One challenge comes from the leading Shia opposition society Al-Wifaq, which is pressing for constitutional reforms through peaceful demonstrations and considering whether to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Al-Jamry said that the government has handled this challenge well in terms of allowing a series of demonstrations to take place without incident.

THE AL-KHAWAJA CHALLENGE

11. (C) More difficult for the King has been the challenge presented by a group of radical Shia led by activist Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja. Al-Jamry was highly critical of Al-Khawaja,

terming him an opportunist who was more interested in personal notoriety than genuine reform. He cited an Arab expression about people who exploit a good cause (in this case, unemployment among Shia) to create mischief, and said that this expression describes Al-Khawaja perfectly. He said that Al-Khawaja has absolutely no interest in democratic reform, and that if Al-Khawaja ever took over people would look back on the days of the Al-Khalifa as paradise.

12. (C) Al-Jamry said that Al-Khawaja's goal is to provoke the government into aggressive responses, believing that he is "untouchable" because he has the backing of the United States, Europeans, and Western human rights groups. He said that the King is in a box and doesn't know what to do. He said the Royal Court called him for advice when confronted with Al-Khawaja's most recent demonstration in front of the Royal Court (Ref B). In fact, Al-Jamry said, Al-Khawaja is creating a dilemma for others as well. Mainstream Al-Wifaq leadership feel he is complicating their maneuverings with the government over constitutional reform and election participation, and is also drawing away disaffected young Shia attracted by Al-Khawaja's more aggressive stance. Leading Shia clerics like Shaikh Issa Qassim don't like Al-Khawaja because he comes from the radical Kerbala-based Shirazi sect of Shias, while Issa Qassim -- 95 percent of Bahrainis -- look either to Qom or Najaf. Even representatives of the more radical wing of Al-Wifaq, such as spokesman Abdul Jalil Singace and Vice President Hassan Mushaima, who have supported Al-Khawaja, are conflicted: they do not like Shirazis and disagree with Al-Khawaja on the question of election participation (Al-Khawaja apparently is weighing running for parliament).

COMMENT

13. (C) Al-Jamry represents much of what is good about Bahrain since King Hamad launched his reform effort. Having spent years in London in exile, he returned and set up a newspaper that is contributing to the more open discourse that one finds in Bahrain these days. He believes passionately in reform, and is willing to take risks (as when he took on the Malkiya wall issue). But he recognizes the complexities of moving the reform process forward in Bahrain -- both because of the dynamics within the Royal Family and within the opposition Shia community. He acknowledged to the Ambassador that at times he gets frustrated and is tempted to return to the comfortable life he had in London. If he did, it would be a real loss for Bahrain.
MONROE